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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MINSK 000222

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SUBJECT: DAS KRAMER V. MFA, ROUND II

REF: MINSK 192

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Classified By: Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4(B,D  
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11. (C) Summary: Visiting EUR DAS Kramer met on February 23 with MFA America's Desk head Maksim Ryzhenkov. The MFA at the last minute cancelled a higher-level meeting because Kramer refused to allow the GOB to control his schedule. The meeting itself was cordial, despite the repeated accusations and insinuations thrown at the USG. Kramer repeatedly stressed that state television's constant harassment of Embosffs must stop and that the GOB must not resort to violence during upcoming elections. Ryzhenkov took the offensive and accused Kramer of conducting a secret meeting with the ODIHR election mission in Belarus, asserted that negative U.S. actions are the main cause for negative press in Belarus, and claimed that the USG is trying to limit trade with Belarus. The MFA also noted that GOB restrictions on student exchanges are meant to ensure order in the educational system. Kramer maintained that Belarus is only isolating itself internationally, and that all trade, WTO and MFN problems are a direct result of the GOB's own actions. After Kramer left the country, the MFA told the press they were disappointed with his visit. End summary.

12. (U) On February 23, visiting EUR DAS David Kramer, accompanied by Ambassador Krol and Embassy note-takers, met with MFA America's Department Head Maksim Ryzhenkov, deputy head Andrey Rzhessky and desk officer Sergei Sergeev.

#### Low Level of Meeting

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13. (C) Kramer was originally scheduled to meet with Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Gaisenk. However, after Kramer and Post refused to allow the MFA to dictate Kramer's schedule, the MFA lowered the level of the meeting. Kramer opened the meeting by expressing regret he could not meet with the DFM, explaining the Embassy sets his schedule and that this was yet another missed opportunity by the GOB for substantive dialogue.

#### MFA on the Attack/Secret ODIHR Meetings?

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14. (C) Ryzhenkov retorted that the meetings the MFA wanted for Kramer (with both houses of parliament and CIS election observers) would have shown Kramer the GOB's position.

Ryzhenkov questioned how, if both Belarus and the U.S. are OSCE members, the USG can refuse to recognize the Belarusian parliament. He also complained that Kramer would not let any GOB representatives sit in on his meeting with ODIHR. Such a refusal, Ryzhenkov maintained, puts ODIHR's objectiveness and transparency into question, and made the GOB wonder about secret ODIHR goals and activities. (Note: Kramer had no

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meeting with ODIHR on his schedule.) Meeting the CIS election observation team, Ryzhenkov maintained, would have given Kramer an objective view of Belarus' pre-election period.

15. (C) Kramer parried that he trusted ODIHR to give an objective assessment, and that in no other country does the host government demand to participate in such meetings.

#### Belarusian State (Non) Media

16. (C) Ryzhenkov complained the U.S. Embassy does not invite state media to press conferences and does not give it information. Ryzhenkov particularly regretted Kramer's decision not to allow state media to participate in his February 24 press roundtable with independent media (septel).

The MFA official admitted that state media depicts the U.S. in a negative light, but claimed this is only because Belarus has freedom of speech and depicts the U.S. as it actually is.

This freedom is why the night before state television gave opposition candidates airtime. (Note: Ambassador interjected, "For the first time, and only 30 minutes!")

17. (C) Kramer admitted that he might have considered inviting state media to his press conference if they would stop harassing Emboffs. He called state media an offensive, unprofessional tool of the regime, and asked why this harassment has not stopped, even after Kramer has raised it

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many times with the MFA and Belarusian Embassy in Washington.

When Ryzhenkov lamely explained the MFA does not control state media, Kramer challenged the MFA to therefore issue a statement condemning such harassment.

#### A Bad Public Image is Whose Fault?

18. (C) Ryzhenkov blamed the U.S. for its own negative image in Belarusian state media, which results from its introduction of trade and visa sanctions against Belarus. Ryzhenkov claimed that many Belarusians think there are secret and improper USG activities aimed against the GOB.

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State media depicts Emboffs as it does because they are the "tools" of this negative U.S. foreign policy.

19. (C) Kramer retorted that he had just come from Brussels, where the EU expressed serious concerns about Belarus. He added that he often visits Moscow, and many Russians share these concerns. These facts show the GOB officials' picture of the U.S. vs. Belarus is not accurate. In fact, it is Belarusian actions that worsen Belarus' international image, such as the recent detention of four pro-democracy activists (reftel). Kramer stated the USG urges Minsk to release these people immediately, drop any charges, and stop raiding peoples' offices and apartments. He concluded his argument by explaining that the West has tried several times to engage the GOB in dialogue, such as through the step-by-step or benchmark proposals, but in each case Minsk refused.

110. (C) Ryzhenkov then tried to claim that the USG controls American media to smear Belarus. Kramer immediately shot

back that this is untrue, but that the BKGB does control Belarusian media. He reiterated that the GOB has chosen not to stop media attacks against the West, and that Belarus' international image is of its own making. Kramer stated the USG would prefer to see Belarus integrated into the Euro-Atlantic community while maintaining close ties to Russia. Instead, Minsk has chosen the path of self-isolation. Ryzhenkov blurted out, "So, we are sanctioning ourselves? This is absurd," then asked to move to other bilateral topics of interest.

#### Elections Must Remain Non-Violent

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¶11. (C) Kramer asked to say a few words about elections first. He explained the USG and others are worried that the current presidential elections are heading in the wrong direction, and qualified that the USG supports the democratic process, not any one candidate. Saying he was passing this message to all parties, Kramer strongly underscored the importance of the elections being concluded without any resort to force or violence. Belarus should abide by its OSCE obligations and allow its people to peacefully protest if they so desire.

¶12. (C) Ryzhenkov countered that the GOB has done everything Kramer asked on his last visit; Minsk invited international observers, registered all four candidates and gave them media access. He agreed that the GOB also does not want any bloody protests, but claimed, "Now is too early to speak of violence." Kramer noted that it is never too early to speak of non-violence.

#### The USG Blocks Belarusian Trade, Despite GOB Goodwill

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¶13. (C) Asking to move on from elections, Ryzhenkov raised a grab bag of smaller issues. He decried alleged State Department and USG attempts to recommend against trade with Belarus, even though this trade is growing. Claiming, "We spend tens of millions of dollars in the U.S.," Ryzhenkov ludicrously claimed that the American company Caterpillar was able to buy tires in Belarus, even though there was rising demand by Belarusian and Cuban companies. He asked that the USG not block trade, as the "common American and Belarusian peoples" would know who was to blame (the USG) if trade falls. (Comment: Caterpillar and other U.S. companies have complained that Belarusian tiremaker Belshina has failed to fulfill orders. Although denying the charges, Belshina admitted to giving preference to CIS and Belarusian companies.)

¶14. (C) Ryzhenkov then accused the U.S. of blocking Belarusian accession to the WTO, saying the GOB has done

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everything it has been asked to do regarding membership. He asked the USG not to politicize accession and to have a civilized dialogue with Minsk. Ryzhenkov also stated Minsk is open to cooperation on combating TIP, drug smuggling and international crime, wants membership in the Egmont Group to cooperate with FINCEN on money laundering. He also recognized the USG for effective humanitarian assistance and said Belarusian presidential decrees have not hindered this assistance. Furthermore, he maintained that Minsk allows the Embassy to participate in events such as those related to Kosciuszko's birthday to improve the USG's image. Ryzhenkov also asked for support for a Lukashenko proposal presented during the UN General Assembly to combat TIP.

#### Rebuttals and a Defense of Student Exchanges

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¶15. (C) Kramer replied that it was hard to support anything from Lukashenko at the UN after he blamed the U.S. for all the world's ills in his UNGA speech. Kramer continued that certain of Lukashenko's TIP initiatives have brought a virtual end to student exchanges. Such travel restrictions are not the way to engage with Washington. Both Kramer and the Ambassador explained that Belarus should not count on an automatic renewal of MFN status (Jackson-Vanik). This will be a political decision that depends on Belarusian restrictions on emigration. Kramer also raised the good work the USG does with humanitarian assistance to Belarus, but complained that this work gets lost in the GOB's anti-American propaganda.

¶16. (C) Ambassador clearly stated that any accusations the U.S. restricts trade are false. Rather, the low levels of trade reflect Belarus' poor business climate. He explained that the U.S. Department of Commerce issued a statement last fall warning U.S. companies from transiting goods through Belarus. This warning came after the Embassy unsuccessfully tried to work with the GOB to solve problems with U.S. companies. Ambassador also explained that Belarus' problems on WTO accession are purely economic and reflect a lack of cooperation from the GOB. Econoff added that Caterpillar appealed to the USG for assistance because of its problems in trying to buy Belarusian tires, and that thus far the GOB had been unresponsive to Embassy requests for help. Ryzhenkov only replied, "I received new information just today."

I'm Rubber and You're Glue  
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¶17. (C) Ryzhenkov responded that yes, U.S. companies have problems in Belarus, but that Belarusian companies are also discriminated against in the U.S. He said there were not many examples of U.S. goods being confiscated. Rather, the GOB frequently confiscates transiting goods from Poles, Lithuanians and Russians, but their governments do not complain as they know these confiscations are legal.

¶18. (C) Ryzhenkov attempted to defend the crackdown on exchanges. First, he explained that GOB officials need to provide a strong reason before they are allowed to travel abroad. Claiming that the Belarusian state pays for most education, students who do not return to Belarus owe the GOB for their education. He also graciously claimed the GOB is only interested in defending U.S. law, since students become illegal immigrants when they do not return. He concluded, "This is not self-isolation, but ensuring order in our school system."

Why Do You Keep Raising Violence?  
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¶19. (C) Kramer concluded by reiterating two main points, that state television harassment of Embosffs is ugly and must be stopped, and that if the GOB resorts to election violence it will face serious consequences. Ryzhenkov replied by asking if the USG had information on who would use violence and if this could be shared with the GOB. He ended by saying that neither the U.S. nor EU had ever raised the issue of violence before, so he did not understand why it was being raised now. Ambassador replied that it seemed appropriate, given the several times Lukashenko has announced he would use force to prevent any revolution.

MFA Dissatisfied with Visit  
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¶20. (U) On February 25, the MFA's spokesman expressed disappointment with Kramer's visit, saying, "We did not hear

from him any serious proposals regarding the existing problems in the bilateral relationship and the development of cooperation in areas of mutual interest. He voiced a standard set of evasions and conditions. There was the impression the State Department representative either was not ready for a serious talk or did not have the necessary authority." The spokesman complained that Kramer did not want to participate in any meetings suggested by the MFA, which could have "helped the American guest form a more balanced and objective view of the Republic of Belarus." The MFA accused Kramer of excluding state media from his press conference, which he held in a "secret" time and place, making it harder to build "mutual respect and trust between the peoples of our states." The spokesman also dismissed Kramer's focus on preventing violence, claiming the Belarusian people know there is no cause for concern. He added, "We would ask the USA to use all opportunities at its disposal to talk the potential initiators of violence out of staging disturbances if, of course, the American side maintains contact with them."

Comment

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¶21. (C) Contrary to the MFA statements, it was the Belarusian side which was not prepared for a serious dialogue. However, though the MFA stubbornly rebutted each of DAS Kramer's statements, his message on conduct of elections, restraint from use of violence, and release of arrested NGO activists was clearly delivered. The MFA could not have hailed to hear it.  
Krol